Save My Game

Dealing with "Why?"

By Jason Nelson-Brown

This column provides advice for DMs whose campaigns are in trouble. Do your players constantly bicker or complain about issues both inside and outside of the main campaign action? Do your best ideas fall flat? Have you set up a situation that you now wish you hadn't? Worry no more, because Jason Nelson-Brown has the answers to save your game!

"Why, Why, Why?"

What's a DM to do when the players are always asking why the rules work the way they do? Are they genuinely interested in rules design, or are they just looking for a loophole that will give their characters an advantage? This installment of *Save My Game* examines ways to address such questions from both a rules balance and a campaign flavor perspective.

Problem: Players Who Question the Rules

I have a hard time telling players why the rules work the way they do without sacrificing either rules balance of the verisimilitude of the game. -- **Adapted from a post by MindWandererB on the D&D boards at the Wizards of the Coast website**

A player who constantly questions elements of the game can be as tiresome as a two-year-old who has launched into an endless string of "whys." Why is chain mail better than scale mail? Why can't a character make herself invisible with *silent image*? Why does armor make a character harder to hit instead of absorbing damage? Why does healing have to come only from divine magic and not arcane? Why do the enhancement bonuses on armor and shields stack but those on bows and arrows don't? Why is the spell level of a given spell usually different from the class level at which a spellcaster gets it?

The way you respond to these kinds of rules design questions can vary a great deal, depending on the nature of the query and the circumstances. So let's look at the advantages and disadvantages of several different options.

Related Articles

Interested to continue the discussion on **D&D**'s rules? We'd also recommend the recent Design & Development columns: Development Doesn't Like Much, and Three Pet Peeves. In these articles, R&D's Jesse Decker discusses some of his own take on the rules -- including some of his favorite additions, least favorite problems, and some of the house rules invented by fellow R&D members in their own games.

Solution 1: Rules are Rules -- Suck It up!

Sometimes the simplest answer is the best one. Whatever game element is at issue, just tell the player that it works the way the rules say, period. If necessary, remind the argumentative members of your group that they are all playing a game, and the name of that game is **D&D**. The **D&D** game is not freeform roleplaying -- in fact, it is

often rather rules-intensive. Magic, combat, and other rules elements work the way they work, and those who can deal with that fact are generally more successful as players in the long run.

Solution 2: Metagame Explanation

Rather than answering the question within the game world context, you can frame your justification for why a given rule works the way it does in terms of rules design. However, your ability to explain the rationale for a given rule depends to a great extent on your knowledge of and experience with the game system. If you've played the game through more than one edition, you know that certain aspects of the rules have stayed the same for many years, and that those features help to define the game as **D&D**. If the point at issue is one of those rules, you may not be able to explain the reasoning in any objective or consistent manner. Sometimes you have to just appeal to tradition and let it go at that.

If time and experience with the game have given you insights into certain game mechanics, you can try to explain the answer to a player's question in those terms. This tactic doesn't do much for the verisimilitude of your campaign, but it does give players a better understanding of game balance issues. For example, suppose a player wants to know why his character can't activate two wands at once. You can tell him that activating a wand is a standard action, so a character can do it only once per round. Activating two wands in a round would be like casting two spells in a round or getting two full attacks in a round. (Yes, I know, special rules allow a character to do both, but those are exceptions that prove the rule.). The point is that the designers didn't want spells from wands to be obviously better than spells cast the regular way, so wands must obey the same limits as regular spells -- except that using a wand does not provoke attacks of opportunity.

Solution 3: Make an Analogy

One good way to address a rules issue is to think about the way the rule works and come up with an explanation or analogy. For example, suppose a player asks you why a character can't make two wands with the same command word. You could give any number of in-world reasons -- perhaps because the deities of magic will it so, or because some oddity in the laws of magic prohibits it. In the ***Forgotten Realms*** *Campaign Setting,* each mage may choose a unique sigil, and Mystra, the goddess of magic, guards the sanctity of these designs. If two wizards accidentally come up with the same (or very similar) runes, only one works, and knowingly trying to copy someone else's sigil can earn the perpetrator a divine curse. A similar reasoning could apply to item command words.

Or perhaps a wand's command word is like a username on the internet. By that reasoning, two wand users trying to access the same magical power source via the same command word would be like two people trying to sign onto the internet with the same username. On most ISPs, if someone else has already taken a particular combination of letters and numbers as a username, the next person who wants it must settle for a different one (jasonnb37 instead of jasonnb, for example).

If you want to offer a more in-depth explanation, you could point out that since wands are spell trigger items, pronouncing the magic words is akin to channeling the magical energy required to cast the spell in the first place. A wand spell isn't a not-quite-complete spell, such as a character might find on a scroll, and the energy to power it comes from the wand, but the user must connect with the item via the command word to make the magic work.

Think of a wand as a flashlight. The wand contains the batteries (the energy to trigger the spell) and the light bulb (to produce the effect), but the user must flip the switch to connect the two. The difference is that not just anybody can do so. Only someone with the right training and the ability to handle magic of the appropriate type

can "conduct" this magical energy. Having a fighter say the command word is like trying to run a current along a rubber band -- it just won't happen. But a spellcaster with the relevant spell on her list can easily make the magic flow.

Or perhaps a character can be a conduit for only one spell-trigger item at a time because the "circuit" is busy when the character is already using a wand. By this reasoning, a unique command word is irrelevant, since two wands can't use the same circuit simultaneously anyway.

Solution 4: Maybe the Player Has a Point

A player who constantly questions the rules might do so to find an advantage or a loophole, or just to be argumentative, or for some other questionable reason. But more often than not, people ask questions simply because they wonder about the answers. A lot of the **D&D** rules require some interpretation, such as alignment relative to actions. But some rules provoke questions because they are seemingly nonsensical. For example, a pick doesn't deal enough damage to break through the hardness of stone, so how can picks be used for mining? And why is water pressure damage so extreme that no creature could possibly survive below 100 feet of water?

Players may be honestly confused about how the rules work in your campaign, and where your house rules may deviate from or expand upon the rules as written, so do your best to explain. And your players may also spot a rule that just doesn't add up. For example, the *alter self* spell description stipulates that the caster's hit points don't change when she changes shape. Her ability scores stay the same, but her Hit Die size could change if she turns from a human sorcerer with d4s into a lizardfolk or bugbear with a humanoid's d8s. Nevertheless, her hit points don't change.

Polymorph works like *alter self,* except that the subject's physical ability scores do change, and the Hit Die size of his new form could change all over the map, from fey d6s to dragon d12s. But nowhere does it contradict the *alter self* stipulation that hit points don't change. It seems a little strange that a character's hit points would remain constant whether he turns into a house cat or a dire bear, but that's the literal interpretation of the rule.

Your players might well ask why the rule was set up that way, or even whether it works that way in your campaign. Game-mechanical reasons for it to work that way abound -- to avoid making *polymorph* (or wild shape) too powerful relative to other similar-level spells or abilities, and so that shapechanging wizards or druids don't become better combat machines than the party's fighter. But why would a wizard *polymorphed* into a giant be so much weaker in terms of hit points than a regular giant? That concept doesn't make sense either.

Summary

Sometimes you have to think hard about the answers you want to give. "I can't really give you a good answer now; let me think on it," may be your best option in some cases. Game time is precious, so it may be best to put off a detailed discussion until after the game, maybe do it via email between sessions. But follow through when you say you'll think about it and take player input seriously. Don't get bogged down with arguments over

minutiae, but give important issues the attention they deserve, then make your decision and keep those dice rolling.

About the Author

Jason Nelson-Brown lives in Seattle with his wife Kelle, daughters Meshia and Indigo, son Allen, and dog Bear. He is an active and committed born-again Christian who began playing **D&D** in 1981 and currently runs one weekly campaign while playing intermittently in two others.

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